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## In Somalia's war, a new challenger is pushing back radical al-Shabab militia

GALLERY



**Somalia's moderate Muslims rise up to fight extremism** ([LAUNCH PHOTO GALLERY](#))

A moderate Sufi Islamist militia in Somalia could offer an alternative strategy for the United States in the fight to stem a rising tide of Islamic radicalism in the failed state on Africa's east coast.

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MOGADISHU, SOMALIA -- From behind green sandbags, Abdul Gader fired his rusting AK-47 down a narrow road. A Koran, its pages open, rested on the earth near his sweat-soaked body. So did a pile of bullets. Before him was territory controlled by radical al-Shabab fighters. Behind him was territory Gader and his comrades had taken away from them.

"They are the enemy of my religion and my culture," Gader, a strapping 17-year-old with a boyish face, declared after pumping another burst of bullets at his targets lurking among crumbling houses.

Four days earlier, Gader's moderate Islamist militia had accomplished what the Somali government, backed by tens of millions of dollars in U.S. assistance, could not do for two years: It pushed al-Shabab out of Sigale, a forlorn Mogadishu enclave.

The militia, a Sufi group known as Ahlu Sunna Wal Jamaa, is posing the strongest challenge yet to al-Shabab, an al-Qaeda-linked organization. The Sufis potentially offer an alternative strategy for the United States and its allies in the struggle to stem the rising tide of Islamist radicalism in this failed state on Africa's east coast.

"There's a gap to be filled, and Ahlu Sunna is filling it," said Ahmed Haji Hassan, 22, a fighter who swaggered with confidence near the sandbagged front line of Somalia's brutal civil conflict.

The rise of Somalia's moderate Muslims often draws comparisons to the Sunni tribes in [Iraq's](#) Anbar province that rose up to fight al-Qaeda extremism in their country.

Like them, the Sufis have wider political ambitions and could bring a measure of stability and relief from the brutal thuggery of al-Shabab. But many skeptical Somalis, jaded by nearly two decades of war, fear that the Sufis are just the latest jumble of self-interested holy warriors competing for turf and power.

"They could have a positive impact. Or they could become an obstacle to Somali reconciliation," said Abduwali Nour Farah, 31, a businessman. "For now, the people are supporting their gains. But in our history, we have seen such groups rise up all the time."

For centuries, the Sufis were men of peace. They followed a spiritual current of Islam that emphasizes moral education, tolerance and a personal link to God. When Somalia plunged into clan wars after the collapse of the central government in 1991, Islam's extremist Wahhabi strain gained strength amid the

anarchy.

But the Sufis engaged in neither the conflict nor politics. When neighboring Ethiopia invaded Somalia in 2006, with covert U.S. backing, to suppress a hard-line Islamist movement, the Sufis remained on the sidelines.

The invasion sparked the rise of the ultra-radical al-Shabab, which swiftly took control of large patches of southern and central Somalia. Al-Shabab fighters soon set their sights on the Sufis, whom they branded as heretics, assassinating Sufi clerics and burning down Sufi shrines. They opened Sufi graves and pulled the bodies out.

"In this world, they kill you. And when you die, you still cannot escape," said Abdullahi Abdurahman Abu Yousef, a senior Sufi commander.

The Sufi uprising began in central Somalia last year. Sufi clans fought clans that backed al-Shabab, adding a religious dimension to a conflict shaped by ideology, power and fears that Somalia will become a haven for global terrorists.

The Sufi forces, widely believed to be backed by Ethiopia, have pushed the radicals from several key areas. Late last month, they entered the Somali capital after striking a shaky alliance with the government. They drive pickup trucks mounted with machine guns adorned with red plastic roses. Loudspeakers play eclectic Sufi songs, defying the hard-liners' [ban on music](#).

Sufi leaders try to leverage their moral authority as the only Somali faction not to have fueled the nation's chaos.

"In 20 years, we did not participate in the civil war," said Adam Maalin Abuker, a senior leader. "Now, we want to bring back law and order."

In Sigale, they have done just that, at least for now. In Somalia's turbulent contest, territory is won back as quickly as it is lost. Residents who fled al-Shabab's savagery and harsh decrees have trickled back, if only out of curiosity.

"I haven't seen my neighborhood in two years," said Hawa Ahmed Mohamed, a stooped 70-year-old who was targeted as a "nonbeliever." But she is too afraid to visit her house. "It's on the front line," she explained.

Some of the Sufi warriors look no older than 14 or 15. Most wear traditional sarong-like garments, sandals and necklaces made from Muslim worry beads. All say they believe they are fighting God's enemies.

"When the hawaridge abused my religion, it upset me," said Ahmed Arab Abdi, 22, a fighter from central Somalia, using the Somali word for extremists. His right hand was bandaged, wounded by shrapnel in a battle the day before.

"I am happy to die," chimed in Noor Hussein, a 26-year-old from Sigale who joined the Sufis to liberate his neighborhood.

The fighters said they were unpaid. Many derided government troops and an African peacekeeping force in the capital as more interested in earning salaries and chewing khat, a leafy narcotic, than in pushing out al-Shabab.

"They have 10,000 soldiers, and all they control is 10 kilometers," Abdi said. "If they are fighting for money and khat, they will gain zero ground. "

## **View from the capital**

The suspicions are mutual. Inside a government compound protected by African peacekeepers, Justice Minister Abdirahman Mahmoud Farah said the Sufi ranks are filled with fighters from rival clans who simply "want to use the Ahlu Sunna's war as a ladder to power." Interior Minister Abdugader Ali Omar dismissed the Sufis' successes in Sigale as "a minor operation."

The Sufis seek both officials' positions, along with other top ministries, in a power-sharing deal. But negotiations fell apart in recent days.

"To get the support of the international community, we need to play inside the political sphere," said Abuker, the senior Sufi leader. "We have earned the right to run the government one day."

But tensions between the Sufis and officials in the capital are exacerbating rifts in a government already paralyzed by internal bickering. The government is formed from clans -- some of them Wahhabi Islamist -- that are suspicious of the Sufis.

The Sufis themselves are also divided. A rival Sufi militia claims to be the legitimate representative of the nation's Sufi tradition. It is made up of clans that support the government.

On one recent humid morning in Sigale, Gader and the rest of his fighters prepared for the next battle. Clutching their guns, they lined up in formation and sang uplifting Koranic songs.

Abu Yousef, the commander, stood under a drooping tamarind tree next to a house pocked with softball-size bullet holes. He told his warriors they had a pact with God: If they died fighting al-Shabab, they would enter heaven and God would offer them water from his own hands.

At that moment, gunfire thundered from the direction of al-Shabab positions. "Our heart is telling us to move toward the danger, to free our people and our culture," Abu Yousef said. "Kill them wherever you see them. It is God's order."

The next day, the Sufis pushed al-Shabab back another half-mile.